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ABSTRACT

Noting that the National Council of Teachers of English Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar is working towards formulating national goals for grammar instruction at all levels of schooling, this paper explores what teaching English grammar is all about. The paper contends that, acknowledge it or not, English teachers are engaged in a prescriptivist enterprise. It also finds that linguists, educated in a tradition which prides itself in being empirical and scientific, find it easy to look down on prescriptive rules and the unaccountable importance which the lay public attaches to them. The paper discusses the historical motivation for standardization, which began with the advent of printing, and considers the ideas of the American structural linguists in the 20th century. It also looks at some recent arguments which appear to deny much value for a Standard. The paper describes the "iron fist" type of prescriptivism and the "velvet glove" type of prescriptivism. It concludes by illustrating the insecurities experienced by an ordinary, educated speaker of English in the face of the realities of sociolinguistic variation and proposes that the goal of teachers of English grammar should be that all students consciously know the most important principles of Standard English. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

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We're Prescriptivists. Isn't Everyone?

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The purpose of this paper is to explore what teaching English grammar is all about. This is especially timely now that the NCTE Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) is working towards formulating national goals for grammar instruction at all levels of schooling. Our contention is that whether we, as teachers of English grammar, acknowledge it or not, we are engaged in a prescriptivist enterprise.

As linguists, educated in a tradition which prides itself in being empirical and scientific, we find it easy to look down on prescriptive rules and the unaccountable importance which the lay public attaches to them. It is not difficult to demonstrate the irrationality of the justifications of prescriptive rules, and, by extension, the apparent irrationality of those who adhere to them. Indeed, linguists spend little time on them, evidently feeling that their debunking is scarcely worth the effort. When a linguist does pay attention to modern prescriptivists we get a chapter like Pinker's (1994) Chapter 12: The Language Mavens, which rather aggressively debunks prescriptivist claims. Another linguist, Geoffrey Nunberg (cited in Cameron, 1995, pp. 12-13) believes that prescriptions persist because language users recognize that questions of usage are too trivial to waste time on; moreover, he thinks that they will gradually fade away, pushed back, for instance, by the clear thinking of linguists.

However, Nunberg's rosy outlook notwithstanding, the values of prescriptive grammar continue to dominate non-linguistic discussions of language and grammar, leaving linguists either to rehash futilely the arguments advanced as early as the 1920's by linguist Charles Fries and by many others in the 1950's and early 1960's or to dismiss the whole discussion as inconsequential. Most have chosen the second path to pursue scientific goals, while those who opt for the first path come away frustrated and bruised from

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their encounters with an intransigent public.

Understanding something of prescriptivism and the largely unsuccessful attempts of linguists to reform it is especially important to those of us interested in having an impact on grammar instruction in the schools. We want to achieve greater success than our reforming predecessors.

In claiming that we are all prescriptivists, we want to make clear that we don't consider all prescriptivism to be the same. There is a kind of "know-nothing" prescriptivism which those trained as modern linguists have always resisted. Indeed, ATEG has also disassociated itself from this extreme tradition, because it recognizes, along with composition experts, that this approach to grammar has little to offer writing instruction. However, rejection of hard-core prescriptivism does not remove us from the prescriptivist sphere. One of the counters to extreme prescriptivism is that students need to develop control of the standard language so that they can use it in contexts where it is appropriate while allowing their own variety to function in other contexts. We argue that this more "enlightened" position is also prescriptivist and assumes that linguistic variation is static and well-defined. More importantly, this rationale for knowing the standard does not help students recognize that sometimes it is appropriate to be inappropriate.

An important issue to address is why most of the general public seems completely baffled by linguists' claims that every dialect is as good as every other. In other words, why does a position as seemingly irrational as prescriptivism maintain its hold in the face of impeccably rational linguistic arguments? Pinker's (1995) discussion of prescriptivism referred to above underscores the seeming irrationality of prescriptivism by observing that while no one would dream of characterizing an instance of whale song as correct or incorrect (p. 370), human beings routinely impose such judgements on instances of language from other humans. Pinker condemns the lack of scientific objectivity and the inability to appreciate the astonishing linguistic complexity of any language variety, which both lie behind such judgements. Like Pinker, we condemn the lack of objectivity in prescriptivism, and we voice strong agreement with the position that a partial answer for the "success" of prescriptivism lies in the perceived utility of the oppressive gate-keeping use of its ideology.

It is important to recognize the reasons for the persistence of prescriptivism. First we believe that many of the historical reasons for developing and insisting on the use of standard language persist today. We reject arguments that the notion of a standard is no longer necessary.(1)

Pinker has missed his mark somewhat. While it is true that language variation is natural and that it is certainly just as irrational to condemn spi.'

infinitives and the like as it would be to condemn a whale song as incorrect, we argue that it is not irrational, from a social perspective, to privilege one variety over another. We suggest that there were compelling social reasons for privileging one variety of the language, and that, more importantly, those motivations persist today. We contend that ordinary language users embrace prescriptivism because they believe, against all argumentation and enlightened thinking, that it is natural that value judgements are made on the basis of language use. Tied to this belief is another belief, paradoxical, that they can find security against negative value judgements, inevitable within any speech community containing marked variations, within prescriptive ideology. We discuss two forms that these value judgements can take, what we call "iron fist" and "velvet glove" prescriptivism. Finally, we conclude with a description of an ordinary, educated speaker of English, illustrating how her linguistic insecurity compelled her to embrace a prescriptivist ideology, and we suggest that teachers need to teach the standard language with a view toward increasing student linguistic security.

Historical Motivation for Standardization (or is that an "s"?)

The process of standardization of English can be said to have begun with the advent of printing and consequent wider dissemination of printed material in the 15th century. Early on, it was perceived that the extensive and dramatic linguistic variation in England as well as the rapid pace of language change presented a challenge. It is perhaps difficult for us to imagine the marked differences between varieties of English at the time, all co-existing within the small space of England. Today, we can travel across the continent of North America and have high levels of confidence that regional differences in English, although perceivable, will not unduly interfere with our communications. (Although on some of the islands off the east coast, for example, Tangier and Okrakoke, there are dialects which diverge a great deal from spoken Standard American English.) Such was not the case in the 15th century, as this interesting anecdote from printer William Caxton (written in 1490) makes clear.

> 1. And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne. For we Englysshe men ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, whiche is neuer stedfaste but euer wauerynge, wexynge one season, and waneth and dyscreaseth another season. And that comyn Englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moch that in my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in Tamyse, for to haue sayled ouer the see into Zelande, and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte Forlond, and wente to

> lande for to refreshe them; And one of theym named Sheffelde, a mercer, cam in-to an hows and axed for mete; and specyally he axyd after **eggys; And the goode wyf answerde, that she coude not speke no Frenshe.** And the marchaunt was angry, for he also coude speke no Frenshe, but wolde haue hadde **egges**, and she vnderstode him not. And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wold haue **eyren**: then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstood him wel. **Loo, what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, egges or eyren. Certainly it is harde to playse eueryman by cause of dyuersite and chaunge of langage**. (emphasis added) (Harris & Taylor, p. 86)

Caxton's anecdote is important because, as Harris and Taylor point out (p. 88), it is the first time that the widespread linguistic diversity in England was seen as a problem, and a considerable one at that. Not only, as a printer, did Caxton have to decide which of the then current varieties would be the model which would offer him the best market, but also, and more fundamentally, he had to decide on how to spell the selected model. These problems were further compounded by the rapid pace of language change (which Caxton himself recognized), a pace we are unaccustomed to due to the great success of our standardizing forbears.

> 2. And also my lorde abbot of Westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn euydences wryton in olde Englysshe for to reduce it into our Englysshe now usid. And certaynly it was wreton in such wyse that it was more lyke to Dutche than Englysshe; I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden. (Harris & Taylor, p. 89)

Obviously, the challenges of standardization were enormous. A "consensus" (we use the term loosely) had to be reached concerning a target variety and its orthography while at the same time efforts had to be made to encourage/impose this consensus on usage upon the linguistically fast changing literate population. Nevertheless, the "project" was remarkably successful, and by the 18th century, written usage had greatly stabilized, as we today are able with little difficulty to read the works of that period. Nevertheless, standardizers of the period such as Swift and Johnson were driven to attempt to consolidate the developing consensus of the previous centuries and to continue to try to staunch the flow of linguistic change. For instance, Swift, in calling for an English Academy, suggested that it was preferable to lock usage in place, even if it still sheltered "flaws," and Johnson had the same goal in writing his dictionary, although it is noteworthy that at the end of his project, he admitted to the possibility of only slowing change, not stopping it altogether.

However, the effort towards consolidation of the gains of standardization

which most concerns us is the development of traditional prescriptive grammars, especially those of Robert Lowth and his American imitator, Lindley Murray. These writers promulgated the prescriptive norms which form the basis of the linguistic awareness of the lay public today. Although linguists have rightly criticized the linguistic descriptions on which these norms are based, we suggest (kindly) that the then present urgency of the standardization project blinded these early prescriptivists to the incoherence of their formulations. Nevertheless, their persistent prominence in the public awareness makes it useful to once more point out their descriptive inadequacies.

For example, one of the most notorious prescriptions is never to end sentences with a preposition. This style was given the status of norm in 1762 by Lowth in his *Short Introduction to English Grammar*. In one of the choicest ironies of linguistic history, Lowth repudiates his norm in the very sentence that he promulgates it in [sic]:

> 3. "The preposition is often separated from the relative which it governs, and joined to the verb at the end of the sentence . . . As, 'Horace is an author, whom I am much delighted with.' . . . This is an idiom which our language is strongly inclined **to** (emphasis added): it prevails in common conversation; and suits very well with the familiar style in writing; but the placing of the preposition before the relative, is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous; and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated style." (Cited in Riley & Parker, p. 29)

Obviously, the nature of English had little place at the forefront of Lowth's consciousness.

Another well-known and centuries-practiced norm is the either/or singular agreement rule. A little reflection on the part of Lowth, Murray, and others of their kind would have shown them that their formulation was incapable of harnessing the variation in the speech community. Riley and Parker (p. 44) present the following sentences which short-circuit the rule, asking which present form of *be* is appropriate.

> 4a. Either you or I _____ responsible.
> b. Either he or they _____ responsible.
> c. Either he or I _____ responsible.

In (4a), *am* is the only unambiguous singular form, but it is clearly unacceptable; in (4b), the singular *is* is unacceptable; and in (4c), it appears that neither singular form is acceptable. Obviously, the prescription has little to do with the facts of English, whatever the final story on this usage problem

might be.

Although this type of exercise can be performed with many other prescriptive rules such as pronoun-antecedent agreement with "everybody" and many instances of subject-verb agreement, we will present just one other example, again from Riley and Parker (p. 44): the choice of case following the conjunctions *as* and *than*. The prescription offered by Murray is that the case of the pronoun following the conjunction can be discovered by supplying the part of the clause which is ellipsed. However, this advice can lead diligent but unwary language users down an unhappy path.

> 5a. He can read better than me. (The prescribed form is *I* as in "He can read better than I can read.)
> 5b. He is as good as her. (The prescribed form is *she*.)
> 5c. Who did this? Me. (The prescribed form is *I*.)

Clearly, the prescribed form in (5c) is not a possibility in any variety of English.

Even granting that figures such as Lowth and Murray may have been moved by standardizing zeal, it is evident that they had little interest in reflecting on actual usage or how that usage might reflect the nature of English.

Verbal Hygiene

Such incoherence came under fire by American structural linguists in the 20th century, starting with Charles Fries in the 1920's. We suspect that the motivation for the criticism of the prescriptive norms at that time was the same as it is now. Namely, there is no convincing evidence that even assiduous study of these norms leads to improvement in writing skill. However, neither that lack of demonstrable writing skill improvement nor the clearly demonstrable descriptive inadequacy of the prescriptions could be overcome by reforming linguists, as they failed totally. The history of these failed reform efforts has been described elsewhere, notably in Connors (1986) and our work at the 1993 ATEG annual conference (Kenkel & Yates, 1993).

As linguists, we need to ask why these reasoned and persistently offered arguments have been ignored. We suggest that the main reason for the rejection of these rational arguments is not at all irrational; instead, the rejection can be explained by recognizing that for the public, unlike for linguists, language is heavily value laden. That is, the public does not accept the assumption that language is value neutral. Arguments resting on assumptions to the contrary will, at best, be politely listened to and then

forgotten, or, at worst, be scornfully refused. Why does a prescriptivist orientation to language matter so much?

Deborah Cameron (1995) does not refer to the drive to regulate, judge, clean up, and improve language as "prescriptivism" but instead coins a new term: "verbal hygiene." She asserts that this practice is ubiquitous:

> 6. . . . It is rare to find anyone rejecting altogether the idea that there is *some* legitimate authority in language. We are all of us closet prescriptivists - or as I prefer to put it, verbal hygienists. (p. 9)

From this observation, Cameron notes a paradox. How is it that the public can demonstrate a strong attachment to evaluating usage yet show almost no interest in the criteria used in the evaluations?

She offers two explanations pertinent to our concerns: first, prescriptive conventions represent an authority that people are unwilling to reject. Unlike other social norms such as suitable dress styles, which change readily enough over time, linguistic norms change with great difficulty. Cameron suggests that a reason for this strong adherence is found in the long apprenticeship required of users to master usage prescriptions. Moreover, the long training period all skilled users have to pass through ensures that the conventions will not appear arbitrary at all but instead will be felt as natural:

> 7. . . . If I have invested time and effort learning how to write according to a particular set of prescriptions, I will take some convincing that those prescriptions are not necessary and desirable; to admit that the rules are both arbitrary and pointless is to devalue my own accomplishment in mastering them.
>
> Furthermore, by the end of my apprenticeship I will probably have internalized certain norms to such an extent that I am no longer capable of experiencing them as arbitrary, even if intellectually I know perfectly well that they are. (p. 14)

The combination of personal, emotional investment and the deep inculcation of these norms ensures that change will come with great difficulty, if at all.

A second explanation suggested by Cameron is that prescriptive values allow language users to believe that they do in fact have control over language, as opposed to the post-modernist assumption that language users are speaking subjects acted upon by language (p. 18). Cameron describes the goal of traditional prescriptive grammar as not differing significantly from that of the promotion of Esperanto: an assertion of agency in matters of language. Of course, this confidence is not justified, given the failure of Esperanto to

provide a rational and workable alternative to the perceived chaos of a multilingual world and the obvious difficulties people have conforming to the norms of traditional prescriptive grammar. Nevertheless, language users maintain the illusion. Why?

Michael Newman (1996), like Cameron, discusses the sociolinguistic function of correctness. He notes that the difficulty, for all groups, but especially for "disenfranchised" ones, of learning the conventions of the standard variety as well as controlling the text types usually associated with it, leads to linguistic insecurity in the face of possible negative judgments. The ordinary language user is bound to be apprehensive in the face of the tremendous amount of language variation confronting him. Arguments advanced from a linguistic perspective that no one variety is inherently better or worse than another have been used to try and soothe these understandable fears; however, as discussed above, such arguments have not succeeded in replacing prescriptivism as the basis of language discussions.

For Newman, an unfamiliar text type, especially if it is associated with a variety other than the speaker's, is a very intimidating challenge, and is precisely the challenge constantly confronting our students. To illustrate the dangers faced by speakers in these situations, Newman cites the well known Biblical story from *Judges* on the fatal consequences resulting from pronouncing the word "shibboleth" without an initial alveo-palatal fricative. Newman suggests that prescriptivism is a functional myth that helps people deal with the insecurities that arise each time they open their mouths in a public, non-familiar context, be it social or textual. People have at least an implicit understanding of the "dangers of the information derived from dialect variation as well as the inability of individuals to control it. The myths of prescription serve . . . as mechanisms for dealing with the linguistic insecurity that arises out of this bind" (p. 32-33). Language users like believing that prescriptivism can arbitrate correctness, and that mastering its conventions will allow them to negotiate the mine fields of usage. (Likewise, of course, mastery of the norms will allow them to evaluate others negatively whose texts do not conform to the norms.) This belief justifies the unquestioned embrace of prescriptivist authority.

By the way, we emphasize that we are all stricken with the feeling of linguistic insecurity. Consider for just a moment our professional journals which insist on a particular style sheet. We are always very concerned, for instance, about whether we should use only initials for the first name of authors we cite or the full name. How exactly does one cite a web document today? We submit that having a norm which is set out in authoritative texts which anyone can consult helps relieve some of the insecurity.(2) Certainly, embracing prescriptivism is not completely irrational!

The discussion of Cameron and Newman explains how it is that many language educators and the public at large could for the last 75 years remain so "irrationally" intransigent before the reasoned reform efforts of linguists. Reformers failed because they neglected to recognize that ordinary language users saw language as value laden not value free and that users saw mastery of prescriptive norms less as a threat than as an opportunity to deal with the linguistic insecurity that is an inevitable consequence of high levels of language variation. From this perspective, users see variation as a problem to be solved and prescriptive norms are the best tools available for the task.

Approaches to the Standard

Before considering various kinds of prescriptivism, let us briefly look at some recent arguments which appear to deny much value for a Standard. In the *English Journal* issue devoted to grammar, Skretta's (1996) position is remarkable because he argues so forcefully against any grammar instruction. His major complaint is that grammar instruction is not relevant to the needs of the students he teaches. He makes a very important point which we need to remember as we struggle over why we need to teach about the nature of language to our students.

> 8. To suggest that many of our students are grammatically impaired or in need of explicit grammatical instruction is both dehumanizing to our students and ludicrous from a linguistic standpoint (p 66).

Of course, not knowing Standard English is not a deficit from any modern linguistic perspective. However, there is an expectation that every educated speaker of English knows what the Standard is. Given the life choices available to our students, not knowing Standard English can be a serious impairment.

There is another, more class-based, critique of the Standard which should also be considered. Fairclough (1992) asserts:

> 9. Language standardisation [sic] after all is first a matter of hegemony -- the hegemony of a particular class extended to the linguistic sector of the cultural domain, manifested as the hegemony of a dialect -- and only consequentially a matter of opportunity (p 43).

We can not deny that language standardization has been used as a gate-keeping function. However, as we have shown with the citation from Caxton in (1), the great move to standardization of the English language came from a very real

problem of too much diversity. Fairclough's implication that language standardization has always been a matter of hegemony is historically wrong.

A similar kind of ahistorical reasoning can be found in the manifesto of the New London Group. The New London Group (1996) asserts:

> 10. Cultural and linguistic diversity are now central and critical issues. As a result, the meaning of literacy pedagogy has changed. Local diversity and global connectedness mean not only that there can be no standard: they also mean that the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects: variations in register that occur according to social context; hybrid cross-cultural discourses: the code switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers; different visual and iconic meaning; and variations in the relationships among people, language and material objects. Indeed, this is the only hope for averting the catastrophic conflicts about identities and spaces that now seem ever ready to flare up. (p. 68-9)

Into this diverse "global connectedness," they propose:

> 11. The decline of the old, monocultural, nationalistic sense of 'civic' has a space vacated that must be filled again. We propose that this space be claimed by a civic pluralism. Instead of states that require one cultural and linguistic standard, we need states that arbitrate differences. Access to wealth, power, and symbols must be possible no matter what one's identity markers -- such as language, dialect, and register -- happen to be. (p. 69).

There is something fundamentally flawed in the reasoning of the New London group. Because the world, especially the English-speaking world, is so diverse does not mean that a standard is no longer necessary. In fact, those are the historical reasons for the need to have a standard. The social confusion observed by Caxton in the 15th century is a legitimate fear, even today. (See below for discussion of contemporary reactions to marked language variation.) Historically, it has never been met with no standard; rather it has been met with a standard.

Before identifying kinds of prescriptivisms, it is important to notice that the texts of Skretta, Fairclough and the New London Group are all written in Standard English. This seems to us particularly strange in regards to the New London Group. One would think that a group made up of Americans, Britains, and Australians would be able to model for us what a document composed by people from different standards of English would look like. The manifesto did

appear in the *Harvard Education Review*. Perhaps, the manifesto was standardized by the editors, an interesting practice too in a world where cultural and linguistic diversity are central issue.

Although we can find such arguments against the Standard, it is without doubt the case that the kinds of jobs our students seek require some ability to control Standard English. However, some of the claims for knowing this knowledge we must reject.

Types of Prescriptivism: Iron Fist

There is a kind of prescriptivism -- we will call it the "iron fist" prescriptivism -- which linguists have always resisted. One of the more notorious examples of the iron fist prescriptivism can be found in John Simon's (1980) *Paradigm's Lost*. Simon writes the following of Black English:

> 12. As for "I be," "you be," etc. which should give us all the heebie-jeebies, these may indeed be comprehensible but they go against all accepted classical and modern grammars and are the product not of a language with roots in history but of ignorance of how language works. It may be a regrettable ignorance, innocent and touching, one that unjust past social conditions cruelly imposed on people. But it *is* ignorance, and bowing down to it, accepting it as correct and perhaps even better than established usage, is not going to help matters. On the contrary, that way lies chaos. The point is that if you allow this or that departure from traditional grammar, everything becomes permissible -- as indeed, it has become, which is why we are in the present pickle (pp. 165-166).

As Pinker (1994) has pointed out, the underlying racism in this paragraph is so palpable that we need not waste much time considering Simon's ravings. A more recent example (a *Newsweek* essay included in the sixth edition of Clark, Eschholz, and Rosa (1998) is Larson (1995/1998)). Larson writes about the increasing misuse of the apostrophe to make the larger point about the decline in knowledge of standard English. He wonders:

> 13. Where will it end? Virtual apostrophe's? At times I wonder if all those missing apostrophes are floating somewhere in outer space. Don't they have to be somewhere, if -- as some philosophers tell us -- nothing is ever lost? Lately, I've seen the dirty three-letter word even punctuated as its'
>
> What's next?
>
> I'ts? 'Its?

> How complicated can this be? How difficult is it to teach a sixth grader how to punctuate correctly?

And, he concludes:

> 14. Time to stop this grumbling. Thing's [sic] fall apart. If I start making a list only of the times the apostrophe is used *properly*. I won't even have to wŏrry about it. I can already hear you say, "Your [sic] kidding" (p. 735).

There are two common features in the comments of Simon and Larson. First, both show an uncanny ability to misunderstand the systematicity of linguistic variation. We need not repeat the argument here of the habitual BE in Black English. Notice how Larson now seems to worry about the apostrophe occurring anywhere in *its*. Actually, there is absolutely no motivation for any native speaker of English to do that. However, the demonstrated ignorance of language variation should not make us blind to the fact that both Simon and Larson see that in permitting, or not sanctioning, non-standard forms we are on the edge of chaos. This vision of a chaotic world (welcomed by the New London Group) where all is possible without a standard was the great motivation for standardization in the first place and, as we have argued above, an important concern to the public at large, and, therefore, something to which defenders of teaching the standard must pay attention.

Types of Prescriptivism: Velvet Glove

To counter the ravings of the iron fist prescriptivists, another rationale for teaching English grammar, which we might label "velvet glove" prescriptivism, is offered. Here is the justification for studying standard English in a handbook written for first year college students.

> 15. . . . within the basic "rules" of English grammar, wide latitude exists. Not everyone, for instance, grows up speaking with precisely the same set of grammatical rules. Knowledge of the differences can help you produce sentences that are not only grammatical but appropriate to a particular situation. The "rules" that allow a speaker to say "My sister, she works at ABC" in one situation, for example, are not quite the same as those that lead him or her to say, "My sister works at ABC," in another. If you understand grammar, you will not only understand both statements but also know when and why to use one and when the other. Finally, because language is so closely related to thought, studying our language patterns, our grammar can give us insight

> into our own ways of thinking. If in some important sense we are what we say (and write), then examining the principles through which we express our meanings can help us understand ourselves as well as others. (Lundsford & Connors, 1995, p 156-7)

It is interesting to note the argument beginning with *finally*. Although without the overt racism of Simon, the same underlying assumption is there; namely, we are what we say and write. If a student does not control Standard English, then there is something fundamentally wrong with her reasoning process. Skretta is right to object to such a reason for learning the standard.

However, we wish to focus on the notion that there exist sentences (backed by grammar rules) which are appropriate to a particular situation. The notion of "appropriateness" is what we wish to label the velvet glove prescriptivism and must also be rejected.

Fairclough (1992) provides us with our arguments against the learning of grammar rules to be "appropriate." He examines several reports, especially the Cox Report issued in 1989, commissioned by Her Majesty's Government on the teaching of grammar in the British state-supported school systems. Here is an excerpt from the report in Fairclough:

> 16. Pupils need to be able to discuss the contexts in which Standard English is obligatory and those where its use is preferable for social reasons. By and large, the pressures in favour of Standard English will be greater when the language is written, formal and public. Non-standard forms may be much more widely tolerated -- and, in some cases, preferred -- when the language is spoken, informal, and private. (p. 37)

Fairclough argues there are five presuppositions of sociolinguistic variation about the notion of "appropriateness" which are clearly wrong.

> 17. (1) there is a 1:1, or at least a determinate and well-defined many-to-one, fit between varieties of a language and contexts/purposes they are appropriate for
> (2) this determinate fit characterises [sic] all parts of the sociolinguistic order
> (3) this fit holds for all members of a speech community
> (4) the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate language use is clear-cut
> (5) varieties of a language, contexts, and purposes, are well-defined and clearly demarcated entities. (p. 44)

Fairclough essentially makes two different arguments against the

presuppositions of appropriateness arguments for needing to know the Standard. First, they posit sociolinguistic rules which are clear-cut and known by all the members of a particular community. We know that is not the always the case. Second, and from our perspective even more seriously, an appeal to appropriateness suggests that it is never appropriate to be inappropriate. One of our favorite examples of this is the expression "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." "Ain't," as we all know is inappropriate in most formal contexts, yet this expression we read in editorial commentaries. These writers, in fact, are being "appropriately inappropriate." The concept of being "appropriately inappropriate" implies that the writer/speaker controls the standard and deliberately chooses to violate it.

We need to recognize that the velvet glove prescriptive norms of the "appropriateness" standard are seriously flawed linguistically. Application of appropriateness hides the insidious nature of prescriptive norms. The fact that our sociolinguistic space is not neat and tidy but instead in flux and contentious ensures that our students will experience linguistic insecurity. As teachers our goal must be to help students develop confidence based on knowledge of the standard to assert their own choice of grammar in this social, discursive space.[3]

In the next section, we illustrate the insecurities experienced by an ordinary, educated speaker of English in the face of the realities of sociolinguistic variation.

Paradoxical Response to Language Variation: the case of Betty

In addition to the social, cultural importance of maintaining a standard variety of the language, we believe that the compelling reason for teachers to teach knowledge of the standard is that such knowledge will help develop students' linguistic security within a speech community full of sociolinguistic variation. To suggest that linguistic security is the appropriate goal of English language teaching is not to suggest that we do not promote linguistic tolerance. Of course we do. However, we believe, following Cameron, that speakers will not abandon making value judgements on linguistic form. In the real world, language is never value neutral. Moreover, a consequence of increased linguistic security will be decreased linguistic intolerance. Finally, a focus on the development of linguistic security will help teachers avoid the pitfalls of the velvet glove prescriptivism of appropriateness; instead, the goal will be for students to have enough confidence in their control of the standard to know that they can choose to follow the norms or can choose to be appropriately inappropriate.

An assumption of appropriateness is that every language variety is

wonderful in its own way; namely, that there are particular functions for which each variety is well suited and that each variety has a special expressive power and beauty which gives it a valued position in a diversified community. Of course, we applaud these sentiments; however, we feel that they are not very relevant to the concerns of ordinary speakers, even ordinary, educated speakers.

To support this contention, we would like to describe an encounter that the two of us had this past April with a native Eastern Kentuckian, a woman whom we will call Betty, in her late 50's or early 60's, bright, articulate, and socially comfortable. We were touring Civil War landmarks around Richmond, Kentucky and stopped to look at a small country church that had been right between Union and Confederate battle lines. While reading the historical marker, we were approached by Betty, the caretaker of the church, who asked us if we would like to visit the interior. As she gave us a tour, we had a very pleasant interaction. Upon learning of our professional interest in language, Betty volunteered that she was glad that people spoke differently, that it was good that not everyone was the same. Naturally, we seconded these assertions. Then, towards the end of a 20 minute interaction, she shifted her position, and unaccountably offered an apology for speaking "Kentucky" English; then she compounded her difficulty with the self-criticism that she spoke that way even though she had had the advantage of attending Eastern Kentucky University where "they trained it out of [her]."

We relate the story of Betty because it seems to us that she is representative of the public which those committed to the teaching of grammar in the schools are trying to reach, a public with faith in prescriptivist ideology. In the course of our interaction, Betty's first comments suggested that she had embraced the important liberal values underlying linguistic tolerance: all varieties of English have equal value and merit respect and appreciation of their special beauty and expressiveness. But she went on to demonstrate how superficially held was that belief. Her deepest language attitude was that her regional variety was nothing to be proud of and that, in addition, she was a personal failure to the extent that she was unable to have it "trained out of [her]." Betty, in spite of her social skill, remains linguistically insecure. She could mouth the liberal ideology underlying appropriateness and tolerance, but she could not live it with respect to herself. The paradox of Betty and the countless others like her, is that, in a linguistically stressful situation, she sought refuge in the very prescriptivist ideology that rendered her linguistically insecure.

The story of Betty underlines the importance of the concept of "linguistic security." We propose that the goal of teachers of English grammar should be that all students consciously know the most important principles of Standard English (which, of course, need to be "identified[4]) so that they can have the needed linguistic security to decide for themselves when their language use

generally, and their writing particularly, should conform to the norms of Standard English, when the norms have no relevance, and when they can consciously decide to violate them.

In practice, what might this mean? Our students, once they leave the academy, will be encountering in their work and civic endeavors the need to decide whether the texts they are composing must conform to the Standard. (We think of the growing Plain English movement in writing governmental regulations. The "rules" of writing Plain English require people who are secure in their linguistic judgments to know when those rules, like avoiding the passive, must be broken.)

In 1996, we presented a paper at the annual ATEG conference about two students using grammar checkers (Kenkel & Yates, 1996). Although neither student understood all of the structures the checkers had flagged, one student, whom we labeled linguistically secure, was able to reject advice that was clearly inappropriate for his text and accept advice that did improve his paper. The other student, linguistically insecure, was completely befuddled by the "help" of the grammar checker. This student had clearly realized that she was supposed to know Standard English, but had no security about her own knowledge of English to recognize when the computer was wrong. For such a student, neither appreciation of the naturalness of language variation nor the cultural distinctiveness of various dialects will be of help. We support the teaching of English grammar which makes all students linguistically secure in the grammar they choose to use. Such security, we believe, rests on knowledge of the standard.

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1. We want to point out that much of what we say is not new to ATEG members. Brock Haussamen in a 1997 number of *Syntax in the Schools* makes some of the arguments we advance today. In his paper, Brock is interested in delineating the minimum that students need to know about the standard. In this paper, we are much more interested in why we need to defend prescriptivism. We acknowledge that Brock anticipated some of the arguments we will offer here.

2. By the way, how should we be spelling *standardization* in our paper? What

should we do with some of our authorities who spell it with an *s*?

3. Of course, this is the goal of critical language awareness, which we don't have the space to develop here.

4. This is a problem for even "velvet glove" prescriptivism which presumes clear delineated language rules in all social situations. We must remember the Standard is always being contested.